

Chairman Robert P. Casey Jr. of the Senate Special Committee on Aging
field hearing entitled:

***Securing Social Security:
Accessing Payments and Preserving the Program for Future Generations***

October 16th at 10am at the Phoenixville Area Senior Center, Phoenixville, PA

U.S. SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
G-16 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510 | 202.224.5364

**Testimony of
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I'd like to thank Chairman Casey for holding this hearing to highlight the importance of Social Security for older Pennsylvanians and people with disabilities, as well as the need for increased Congressional investment to improve Social Security Administration operations and preserve the program for future generations.

I have been called as a witness to submit testimony on behalf of the almost 30,000 employees. AFGE Council 220 represents in over 1,200 Social Security Field Offices, Tele-Service Centers (TSCs), and Workload Support Units (WSUs) on behalf of 33 affiliate AFGE Locals across the United States and territories.

Specifically, as it relates to this hearing, I am called to speak on behalf of the 886 employees in the 57 Social Security Field Offices in Pennsylvania. The 189 employees in the Philadelphia Tele-Service Center, and 12 employees in the Philadelphia card center in the state of Pennsylvania are all represented by AFGE Local 1923 and AFGE Council 220.

The 675 bargaining unit employees in the Tele-service Center in Wilkes Barre, PA and 62 employees in the Workload Support Unit in Wilkes Barre, PA are represented by Local 2809, but I have been authorized to speak on their behalf as the AFGE General Committee Spokesperson. The 77 bargaining unit employees AFGE represents in the WSU in the Social Security Administration Mid-Atlantic Program Service Center located in Philadelphia, PA are represented by my colleagues in AFGE Council 109 and Local 2006.

In the words of the Social Security Administration:¹

“The Office of Operations provides frontline and support services to millions of customers each year and completes our program integrity (PI) work, ensuring we pay the right person the right amount at the right time:

- Over 1,200 field offices handle benefit claims, appeals, and post-entitlement events; process applications for Social Security cards; enroll people in Medicare; and address urgent needs and questions from visitors and callers.
- Our 24 teleservice centers answer a broad range of Social Security and Medicare questions; schedule appointments with our field offices; provide status updates on current claims or appeals; and ensure the accuracy of our records.
- Our 10 regional offices around the country oversee and support our frontline offices across the nation; and our 8 processing centers (PC) handle the most complex benefit payment decisions, issue benefit payments after appeals decisions, determine and collect debt, correct records, and perform PI work.”

While our mission and charge have not changed, our ability to meet it has. Since 2010, the number of employees delivering frontline and support services has shrunk by 14%. During this same time, the number of beneficiaries has increased by 25% and Congressional appropriated operating budgets to SSA have decreased by 17% considering inflation. Without appropriating the funds to properly staff the Agency and modernize our systems Congress is setting us up to fail.

AFGE Proposes for Congressional Consideration an Appropriation for Administrative Expenses in SSA for FY 2024 of \$17.39 Billion to Adequately Meet Public Demand:

This budget proposal would be broken down in the same percentages that SSA has proposed for their FY 2024 budget:

- ❖ 56% salary and benefits or \$9.72 billion (including pay upgrades, student loan reimbursement, etc.).
- ❖ 16% other objects (i.e., rent, equipment, furnishings, security guards, magnetometers/metal detectors, etc.) or \$2.77 billion.
- ❖ 17% Disability Determination Service or \$2.92 billion.

¹ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/2024BO.pdf>

- ❖ 11% IT (technology) or \$1.89 billion.

This would restore SSA's work years (WYs), or staffing levels, to 69,430 or near the FY 2010 level of 70,131 WY when we were arguably meeting public demand. This presumes a 4.1% inflation rate.

Statistics on Pennsylvania's Social Security Recipients

According to the Agency's most recent available data, in December of 2021², of the 13,000,000 residents of Pennsylvania (PA), 2.9 million or 22.2% receive Old Age Survivor Disability Insurance (OASDI) benefits. Of that, 2.5 million are 65 or older and 91.1% of them receive OSADI benefits.

Nationwide, of the 332 million Americans, 19.2% receive OASDI benefits. 56 million Americans are age 65 or older and 88.7% of those older Americans receive OASDI benefits.

Therefore, Pennsylvania sits above the national average by 3% in OASDI beneficiaries overall and 2.4% above the national percentage of aged population that is receiving OASDI.

In 2022³, SSA paid out \$5 billion (on average \$1,754 a month per individual) to almost 2.9 million PA OASDI beneficiaries. Of that, 2.3 million are age 65 or older.

Compared nationally, SSA pays out \$111 billion monthly (on average \$1,688 a month per individual) to 66 million beneficiaries, of which 52 million are 65 or older.

In terms of Supplemental Security Income, in 2022, SSA paid 329,000 Pennsylvania beneficiaries (aged, blind, disabled - including under age 18) SSI benefits a total of \$216 million a month (on average \$657 per individual). Of these, 94,000 are concurrently receiving OASDI benefits.

This compares to 7.54 million SSI recipients nationally receiving an average \$649 per month, with 2.5 million recipients concurrently receiving OASDI benefits.

Collectively in the state of Pennsylvania, there are 1,958 SSA field workers servicing these beneficiaries and additional public inquiry requests on a variety of topics ranging from Medicare to Social Security Card applications, whether over the phone or in person, in Social Security Field Offices (FOs), over the National 1800# system in Tele-Service Centers (TSCs), or through internet filing in Workload Support Units (WSUs).

² OASDI Beneficiaries by State and County, 2021

³ Social Security Congressional Statistics 2022, https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/factsheets/cong_stats/index.html

Nationally, the number of Social Security beneficiaries has gone up by almost 25%⁴ since 2010 due to the Baby Boomer generation seeking their Federal Insurance Contribution Act (FICA) payouts in record numbers.

Here are some facts about Baby Boomers:⁵

- ✓ They were born between 1946-1964 and they were the largest generation in US history until 2019, when they were surpassed by Millennials (age 23-38)⁶.
- ✓ Starting in 2011, Boomers began to hit the traditional retirement age of 65 at a rate of 10,000 a day. This pace will continue through 2029.
- ✓ They are online, and in great numbers. According to a Google study, 78% of Boomers were online by 2013, a full 1/3 of all Boomers online describe themselves as “heavy internet users,” and 82% of Boomers belong to at least one social media platform. They also spend more time online each week than Millennials – and they use a lot of that time to research news and politics.

According to the Social Security Administration FY 2024 Budget overview:⁷

We will be delivering approximately \$1.5 trillion in payments directly to our beneficiaries; our administrative costs are only about 1 percent of our total costs. Our programs are the largest anti-poverty programs in the nation. Further, people spend their benefits to pay for living expenses like housing, clothing, and food, putting money into local and State economies.

We are one of the most important anti-poverty programs in the country. We must ensure that our programs and services are reaching underserved communities and people facing barriers, including individuals experiencing homelessness, income insecurity, with limited English proficiency, and with mental and intellectual disabilities.

In terms of Social Security service delivery, our vulnerable population’s convenient and timely access to services is a must. It is often the difference between hunger and homelessness and health and well-being and in many cases, life or death.

Social Security affords the opportunity for every American the right to live with dignity and the promise of income stability.

⁴ AFGE Calculations based on SSA budget analysis.

⁵ Senior Advisory.com - <https://www.senioradvisor.com/blog/2015/07/baby-boomers-facts/>

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/04/28/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers-as-americas-largest-generation/>

⁷ Page 4, Page 2 SSA Budget Overview FY 24 - <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/2024BO.pdf>

Social Security Employees

The 30,000 frontline workers in Social Security Field Operations are trusted, highly skilled, and fully trained to carry out the mission of the Agency and deliver Social Security benefits and services to our nation's most vulnerable in an efficient, accurate, and timely manner.

The almost 2,000 Social Security field workers in Pennsylvania and the remaining 28,000 workers in the 1,200 field offices, 24 Tele-service Centers, and 15 Workload Support Units nationwide take their oath to serve the American people very seriously.

As evidenced in the most recent Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), almost 75% of SSA employees identified with the mission of the Agency and over 90% felt it was important for them that their work contributed to the common good.

According to the Partnership for Public Service⁸, a non-profit, non-partisan organization, SSA is ranked the 2nd most trustworthy Agency in federal government, yet according to the same organization, SSA is ranked dead last in job satisfaction: 17th out of 17 amongst large federal agencies in employee engagement and job satisfaction⁹. This is a sharp change from 2010 and 2011 when SSA was ranked 2nd in the best places to work in the federal government.

Since 2010¹⁰, SSA administrative budgets have been cut by 17% (considering inflation). The Agency has very limited options when it comes to budget cuts. Cutting staff is one of the only options.

As a result of budget shortfalls, since 2010, SSA has not been able to replace 10,226 SSA employees Agency wide^{11,12}. Total employment in SSA has declined by over 14% from 2010 to today.

As of September 2022, SSA reached its lowest staffing levels in 25 years¹³. Meanwhile, the number of beneficiaries continues to climb.

The effects of understaffing and underfunding on individual employee morale have been devastating. The Union surveyed its employee members in September 2022 and found:¹⁴

⁸ <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/trust-in-government/>

⁹ <https://bestplacestowork.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/after-years-of-budget-cuts-increased-funding-would-help-social-security-administration-restore>

¹¹ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/2024BO.pdf>

¹² <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2011/2011BudgetOverview.pdf>

¹³ Page 1 <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/2024BO.pdf>

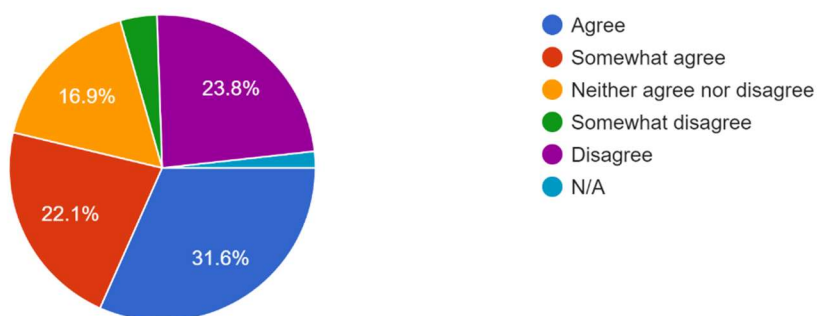
¹⁴ https://www.afgec220.org/_files/ugd/ea4ea7_4c05276f4f1947d4a326ba7eb24c41f3.pdf

- 76 % stated that their large workloads prevented them from performing their jobs to the best of their ability.
- 9 out of 10 say they know someone that has left their job due to overwhelming work stress.
- 8.5 out of 10 say they know a co-worker that has sought therapy or medication to deal with work stressors.
- Tragically, 8% say they know a coworker that has committed suicide linked to work-related stress.

There appears to be no end in sight as a March 2023 AFGE SSA General Committee member flash survey indicates 54% of respondents indicate they are still considering leaving the agency in the next year.

In the next year I am considering leaving my job at SSA?

1,264 responses



According to Jeff Nesbit, the Deputy Commissioner for communications¹⁵, SSA plans to lose 6,000 additional employees between SSA and the DDS in FY 23 due to attrition and if we do not get adequate funding, they will not be replaced.

AFGE Recommendations to Improve SSA Employee Working Conditions:

- ✓ More competitive pay and benefits package (e.g. student loan repayment program).
- ✓ Greater leave flexibility and compassion for leave needs.
- ✓ More manageable workload assignments with uninterrupted desk time.
- ✓ Create a workplace anti-bullying and harassment taskforce.
- ✓ Maintain telework as a vital cost saving, environmental protection measure that improves productivity, service delivery, efficiency, employee morale, recruitment, and retention.

¹⁵ Letter from Jeff Nesbit from SSA Office of Communications, Sept, 8 2022

Public Service Delays

The effects of SSA understaffing while public demand for Social Security benefits and services continues to increase has caused significant delays in public service delivery:

- ❖ Since 2018, initial disability claims processing time has increased by 99%. Processing went from 111 days (3.4 months) in FY 2018 to 221 days (7.2 months) as of July 2023.¹⁶
- ❖ Since 2019, average wait times for calls to be answered on the 800# have increased by 115%. They went from 20 minutes on average in FY 2019 to now 43 minutes in June 2023.¹⁷
- ❖ The disability claims pending at the state-run Disability Determination Services are now over 1 million.¹⁸
- ❖ Since 2018, disability reconsideration processing time has increased by 78%. In FY 2018 it took on average 102.7 days compared to 182.7 days in FY 2022.¹⁹
- ❖ There are now 4.2 million backlogged items pending at the Payment Centers.²⁰

Disability Backlogs

The consequences of the backlog in the disability program are real, causing bankruptcies and possibly increasing the risk of death among an already vulnerable population. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) found over 10,000 people a year die while waiting for an appeal decision after initially being denied Social Security disability benefits, and another 5,000 a year are forced to file for bankruptcy while waiting for their cases to be resolved.

At the end of 2020, there were 975,000 initial disability claims pending with an average wait time of 206 days (6.7 months). As of April of this year, the pending cases exceeded one million cases and continue to grow. The processing time is now over 7 months.

In FY 2022, it took 183 days (6 months) on average for SSA and state Disability Determination Services to process disability reconsideration requests.

SSA²¹ anticipates a 475 day (15.5 months) wait time for a disability hearing for the 2023 fiscal year after an average wait time of 333 (11 months) in 2022.

¹⁶ SSA.gov

¹⁷ <https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/800-number-average-speed-to-answer.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/after-years-of-budget-cuts-increased-funding-would-help-social-security-administration-restore>

¹⁹ https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/disability_reconsideration_average_processing_time.html

²⁰ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/2024BO.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/FY24-JEAC.pdf>

Staffing Attrition Rates in PA

AFGE partnered with Cooley Public Strategies (CPS) to analyze the attrition rates²² in the 57 Field offices, one Tele-Service Center and one Card Center in the state of Pennsylvania.

The report states:

[CPS's report] follows the October 2022 report of the nationwide survey, focus group, and interview data²³ with an updated look at retention and recruitment in Social Security offices specifically in Pennsylvania. CPS determined the attrition rate of each office in the state from 2019 to 2023 and conducted phone interviews with individual employees to better understand the lived experiences behind the data. Using the number of employees in each office from 2019-2023, CPS found that Agency field offices have more turnover than Tele-Service Centers [a trend that is reversed nationally according to Agency numbers] and card centers, but that data could vary widely from field office to field office. In Pennsylvania alone, there are 57 SSA field offices, 18 (32%) of which have attrition rates higher than the 10% mark that is widely considered the level to stay below for a “healthy” organization. This means that these offices are seeing employees leave the Agency after relatively short periods. The table below illustrates the range seen even in the top 10 field offices with the highest attrition rates.

Field Office	Attrition Rate 2019-2023
McKeesport, PA	53%
Sharon, PA	35%
Philadelphia, PA—University City	32%
Pittsburgh, PA—East Liberty	24%
Reading, PA	23%
Harrisburg, PA	22%
Fairless Hills, PA	21%
Chester, PA	17%
Williamsport, PA	17%
Towanda, PA	15%

²² The widest definition of attrition rate is being applied here which measures how many people leave the agency, voluntarily or involuntarily.

²³ https://www.afgec220.org/_files/ugd/ea4ea7_4c05276f4f1947d4a326ba7eb24c41f3.pdf

These elevated rates could signal several things, including the possibility that several or all of the issues identified in the 2022 nationwide survey persist in these offices. To better understand what is driving these specific numbers, CPS contacted several PA employees for one-on-one interviews.

The Agency employees contacted will remain anonymous, but each conversation followed similar themes. When asked about their individual offices and difficulties with hiring and retaining staff, employees shared that they were dealing with unreasonable workloads. Interviewees noted that though the number of employees in their office has decreased, the number of applications they are expected to process has almost doubled. Employees are asked to do the work of two people while maintaining the wages of one. One employee disclosed that several people in her office were choosing to take early retirement because the pressure of doing seemingly impossible amounts of work with little room for error is just too much. In instances such as this, she said, recruitment and training were not enough to fill the gaps.

Another employee also reported heavy workloads and added that the software and systems the Agency uses are out of date and inefficient, complicating the already overbearing workload. Apparently when employees raise such issues with management, however, they are dismissed and discounted. No changes are made, the same problems continue, coworkers leave and are not replaced, and work is piled on to the remaining employees who are left feeling that the Agency is taking advantage of them.

Overburdening workers and failing to provide material evidence of appreciation breeds exceedingly low office morale, which then contributes to higher attrition rates. As a result, the Agency's overall quality of work is diminished. Customers face longer lines, longer wait times, and cannot receive service that is often critical to their everyday lives. These problems will not disappear without concrete changes to working conditions and compensation as well as substantial increases in the number of workers hired.

Attrition Rates Nationwide

Pennsylvania's attrition rate is in line with nationwide trends. Based on a report Grace Kim, SSA Deputy Commissioner of Operations, submitted as testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee, Subcommittee on Social Security on May 17, 2022:²⁴

Our employees are one of our greatest assets to help us address these unprecedented demands. We are facing our lowest staffing level in 25 years. This is driven by insufficient funding over multiple years to hire the level of staff needed, and higher than average attrition rates across the agency. Our funding

²⁴ https://www.ssa.gov/legislation/testimony_051722.html

level will constrain our ability to add the necessary staff to reduce the backlogs that have built up during the pandemic. It will also affect employee morale, which is already at a very low level, as demonstrated by the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and recent Pulse Surveys.

Because of the FY 2022 funding level, we were forced to implement a temporary hiring freeze, including all external Federal hires and DDS hires. In our front-line components such as Field Offices, Teleservice Centers, and Processing Centers, attrition is nearly 7 percent so far this fiscal year, or 2,900 losses. The highest rate is in our Teleservice Centers at over 12 percent to date. At this pace, we believe we will lose over 4,500 front-line operations employees this year, which is 1,000 more losses than we experienced before the pandemic. **This would equate to an annualized attrition rate of 11 percent, or about 4 percentage points higher than our historical average.**

In our State DDSs, where medical decisions are adjudicated, attrition is also unprecedented, at over 25 percent. These complex jobs require about two years of training. The loss of experienced examiners significantly affects the ability to train new employees and complete program integrity workloads...

We are at a crossroads. The cumulative impact will increase our customers' wait times for in-person and phone service, increase claims processing times, and lead to increases in pending workloads. As we dig out from the effects of the pandemic, we must have sustained funding for the public to have continued confidence not just in our agency, but in the government. We know people need our help, and Congress recognizes the importance of our local offices to communities. None of us think it is okay for applicants to wait six months for a decision on their disability application, but that is the level of service Congress, and the public, should expect absent sufficient resources. It will take a multi-year effort and adequate funding to restore pre-pandemic initial claim wait times. We hope we can work with you to resolve these funding challenges and restore the level of service the public requires.

Frontline Employee to Management Ratios

While SSA lacks the workers in field offices for application intake, general inquiry, and to process caseloads SSA FOs are overstaffed in managers, with 1:5 and 1:6 employee to manager ratio in many field offices around the country.

In PA FOs, 71% of offices have a ratio of 1 manager for every 7 employees or less (full report attached).

Effects of High Attrition on Service Delivery in the State of PA and Nationwide.

As reported by the AFGE Representatives in the State of PA, it will take 60 days on average for a customer seeking to apply for Retirement, Disability, or Medicare benefits

to get an appointment with a trained Social Security Claims Specialist as appointment calendars and scheduling are at capacity.

I want to tell you about a small Social Security field office in PA that services three surrounding rural low-income counties, with just three (3) fully trained staff available to assist (if no one is out on leave), with an average of 708 visitors a month this year. The 708 visitors each month request benefit verifications for housing applications, housing re-verifications, job programs, rent rebates, etc., as well as Social Security replacement cards, new Social Security number applications, general program inquiries, tax forms, appointment scheduling, vital record proofs submission, benefit estimates, screenings, etc.

The three employees in this office are addressing the concerns of the walk-in visitors. At the same time, they are assigned appointments for the intake of benefit applications for Retirement Survivor Disability and Supplemental Security Income benefits, as well as program integrity workloads (continuing disability reviews, redeterminations, overpayment workloads), account maintenance processing (i.e. monthly income and asset proofs), mail duties, and public general inquiry questions whether on the phone or on a walk in basis. It is simply too much for three people to do.

There are offices in PA and nationwide, like our example office of three employees, that have no Customer Service Representatives (CSR) or a limited number. CSRs do not require the training and skills that a Claims Specialist (CS) requires. But their work must get done. Therefore, Claims Specialists (CS) are now giving up critical claims processing time to answer the office's general inquiry phone lines and handle in-office customer walk-in questions, process Social Security Card applications, and process mail much of the workweek.

If employees fall ill or go on vacation, this causes further service delivery challenges and employees are faced with having to sacrifice their own family, health, and well-being to meet public service demands. An AFGE Representative in PA shares:

Because our office is small, time off is nearly impossible. Employees have had to return from vacations early to work at the front desk for half a day on Friday when there was no one else available. Reasonable Accommodation (RA) requests are denied for employees with disabilities with the Agency citing reasons of "undue hardship" on the Agency due to the small number of staff. This is unfair to employees with medical conditions and unfair to employees who need to telework for health-related reasons and discriminatory to employees with disabilities. This affects our morale (we have absolutely none) and upper management disregards our pleas for help.

This is consistent with trends nationwide. AFGE represents employees nationally when managers attempt to leverage leave approvals with processing work, deny leave, demand doctor's notes for unanticipated leave, and routinely deny RA requests. We also hear of common practices of employees working through breaks and lunches to

attempt to keep up with caseloads. This violates the Fair Labor Standards Act and the suffer and permit statute as these employees are not paid overtime for their donated work.

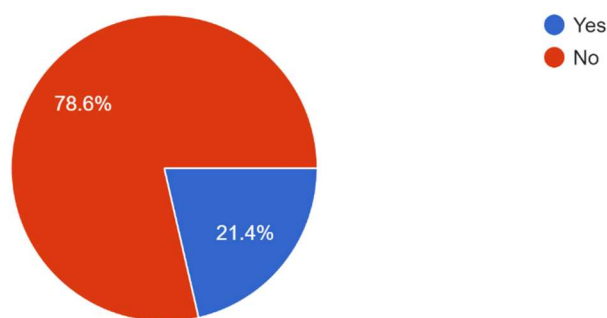
With limited overtime and limited dedicated desk time for processing cases, employees are not able to get to backlogged work timely. From 2013 to 2020, SSA Field Offices were closed to the public on Wednesday afternoons and at 3 pm daily. This allowed employees to focus on clearing backlogs, process applications, and adjudicate pending work with little interruption. After the loss of this valued desk time in 2020, managers began assigning employees lists of work but offering little to no dedicated time to clear them. We have become an Agency of mostly intake. Caseloads are mounting and employees are struggling to keep up with public demand for benefits and services.

Due to this, employees are citing compounding levels of stress. Employees do not have the time to address health issues caused by work stress, or other health conditions, and consequently their health continues to worsen both physically and mentally, burning out from exhaustion in the process. Employees are ultimately forced to decide between their health, paying bills, and maintaining their employment.

Another factor of high attrition at SSA is pay disparities with the private sector. Federal pay now lags the private sector and state and local government by 22.47%, according to the Federal Salary Council. In general, SSA employees (79%) feel their level of pay does not match the importance and complexity of the work they perform. There is also inadequate locality pay in many areas where salaries do not keep up with cost of living.

Do you think the level of pay you receive reflects the importance, complexity, and volume of the work you do.

1,061 responses



SSA employees also have experienced dwindling benefits over the years (like the 2019 loss of their vision program), other regressive cuts to their collective bargaining agreement, a lack of a guaranteed access to a robust telework program, and no remote work program are other factors that contribute to high attrition, according to AFGE.

For these reasons employees are deciding to quit their jobs at SSA. Employees are seeking employment at other government agencies or the private sector where workloads and job-related stress are more manageable, there are better pathways to promotion, the pay is higher, the benefits are better, and there are more telework or remote work options.

All of this has a profound impact on SSA's ability to retain and maintain a productive workforce to service Pennsylvanians' and the nation's Social Security needs.

AFGE Recommendations in Field Offices²⁵.

- ✓ Increase dedicated, uninterrupted adjudication time.
- ✓ Widen manager to staffing ratios.
- ✓ Recruitment and retention pay incentives for workers.
- ✓ Automate and modernize policies and practices to reduce the reliance on paper mail²⁶ and in person delivery of original vital records documents.
- ✓ Enhance field office security.
- ✓ Increase the granting of Reasonable Accommodations and Temporary Compassionate Assignments.
- ✓ Implement a robust and permanent telework program as a recruitment and retention, productivity, efficiency, and morale-boosting tool.
- ✓ Create an anti-bullying workplace task force and rehabilitate sick office cultures with a focus on the psychological safety of workers.
- ✓ Increase leave approvals and eliminate conditions to granting earned leave.
- ✓ Improve training and mentoring of new hires and the existing workforce.

Tele-Service Centers (TSCs) in Pennsylvania and Nationwide

In FY 23, SSA's Tele-Service Center employees are expected to answer 29 million calls into the Agency's 800 number, with callers expected to have an average wait time of 35 minutes before getting an agent²⁷. In the month of June 2023 callers waited on average 43 minutes to speak to an agent. During nationwide system crashes,²⁸ with as many as 40 service disruptions between May of 2021 and December 2022, dropped calls occurred 32% to 80% of the time. Many callers need to make several attempts before they get an agent.²⁹ SSA's phone answering system is outdated. It lacks a call back option common in many phone systems today; it lacks even the ability to communicate an expected wait time.³⁰

²⁵ https://www.afgec220.org/_files/ugd/ea4ea7_c4cbfdf67244431d95102ab2318becd5.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/29/new-report-shows-covid-19-has-delayed-social-security-mail-processing.html>

²⁷ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/FY24-JEAC.pdf>

²⁸ OIG report on phone crashes

²⁹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/28/social-security-phone-issues-led-to-dropped-calls-longer-wait-times.html>

³⁰ OIG report on phone crashes

The TSC in Philadelphia, PA, is like TSCs nationwide. TSCs are typically in major metropolitan areas with high costs of living. SSA Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) are clear that the pay is inadequate in these areas to keep up with the cost of living. Amongst SSA field operation employees, employee attrition rate is highest in TSCs, at 16% in FY 2022.

CSR jobs are fully portable, meaning the work does not require the employee to be in an office to complete all of their assignments. And yet these positions are not fully remote. Workers are forced to fund high commuting and childcare costs to accommodate a hybrid telework schedule.

AFGE Recommendations in TSCs:

- ✓ Offer recruitment and retention pay incentives for workers.
- ✓ Fully hire and staff TSCs.
- ✓ Improve the phone system.
- ✓ Create a remote work pilot since these jobs are fully portable.
- ✓ Improve training, access to mentors, access to Lead CSRs.
- ✓ Improve detail opportunities in other components and promotional potential.

Workload Support Unit Backlogs

Internet disability, retirement, and SSI claims are processed by field offices and the Agency's fifteen (15) Workload Support Units (WSUs) located nationwide. The 915 SSA employees in these WSUs must handle more than 1 million pending cases.

As of June 2023, the staff available to process retirement applications are 485 specialized employees, Title II disability applications are 286 specialized employees, and SSI disability applications are 144 specialized employees. There are 173,495 pending retirement claims, leaving an average of 358 pending cases per specialized WSU employee.

For Title II disability, the overall pending number of cases is 880,395 cases with an average of 309 per specialized WSU employee. For SSI disability the overall pending caseload is 27,262 with an average of 189 per specialized WSU employee.

WSU workloads are fully portable, yet staff are required to still travel into their office at least one (1) day a week and offices are mostly in expensive major metro areas.

AFGE Recommendations in WSUs

- ✓ Pilot a program to make WSU jobs fully remote.
- ✓ Staff WSUs to meet public demand.

Entry Level Training Issues

According to Agency data AFGE received from an information request, SSA new hire attrition is almost 17%. SSA's training models are failing employees. It takes anywhere from 2 to 3 years for an employee to gain proficiency in SSA's complex programs. SSA uses over 300 acronyms and has countless rules guiding determinations. Understanding the rules and nuances of the application process is critical to succeeding at the Agency. We must give people the training and mentoring they need from day one or they will fail.

In Field Offices, successful classroom style training of the past is now replaced with self-paced videos that lack engagement, a way to ask questions, or fully interact with the material. New hires are experiencing insufficient on-the-job training, lack dedicated time to learn and work on new and complex cases, and feel rushed through the learning process. Additionally, new hires face office cultures that do not encourage questions and support, a lack of mentor availability, and high mentor turnover. Due to increased public demand and understaffing, trainees are thrown into the job far too soon and feel overwhelmed. Mentors do not have adequate time away from their duties to assist with training needs.

According to an AFGE Representative:

FO managers have full discretion as to how much time the trainees are dedicating to off-air activities and due to high public demand trainees do not get time to practically apply material before asked to answer general inquiry questions and do job functions that they haven't fully learned. Trainees are being assigned workloads that are inconsistent with their point of progress in the training classes. After training classes, it is often reported that trainees are being placed into full work units and expected to complete the full scope of workloads required of every other proficient employee while they are still being evaluated in the learning process and under mentorship.

A problem exists where much of the evaluation and case tracking of the trainee (called ePAD) is completely subjective and varies from mentor to mentor. With high mentor turnover, this builds frustration on the part of the trainees and they often struggle to meet proficiency requirements.

AFGE Recommendations to Improve Entry Level Training:

1. Utilize a hybrid approach with in-person classroom instruction and virtual training models that prioritize ensuring job knowledge and engagement with live instructors and unrestricted access to mentorship. Create office environments that encourage questions and hands on experience until employees feel comfortable and gain proficiency with the material.

2. Create objective metric tracking of job knowledge, that considers individual learning styles and the need for accommodations, with the opportunity to re-train on subjects as necessary. The CS and CSR are journeyman positions and need to be treated as such. Test tracking and ePad should have benchmarks that provide trainees with specific and realistic goals and timelines distributed over the 2-3 proficiency gaining period. The volume of casework needs to be increased commensurate with the progress in learning and proficiency.
3. SSA should create a train the trainer certified mentorship program for employees to apply for and participate in that includes the distribution of universal training materials that refreshes established basic job knowledge criteria, best practices in mentorship, and how to adapt to individual learning styles. Mentors should have their workloads reduced (by a nationally set standard) while in the certification program and when they provide mentorship.

Telework in SSA Field Operations

In October 2019, SSA's then-Commissioner Andrew Saul ended the decade long telework pilot and sent every SSA employee that was teleworking (up to one day a week for Field Office workers) back to work in offices full time.

When employees were evacuated from offices in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the canceled pilot program SSA was equipped with technology and experience to accommodate field workers in a work-at-home-under-quarantine environment.

Employees in field operations were able to work successfully to continue the mission of the Agency in a robust telework environment over the course of two years until evacuation orders were lifted and employees returned to work in offices more regularly in March of 2022.

SSA Field Operations' employees continue to have the option to telework up to 2 days a week in Field Offices and up to 4 days a week in TSCs and WSUs.

The majority of SSA field workers appreciate the ability to telework as it allows them to focus on productivity due to a lack of in-office distractions and save on commuting costs, childcare expenses for school age children, and elder care expenses. Teleworking gives employees the mental break they need from in-office distractions and long, expensive commutes to focus on productivity and achieve a better work/life balance.

According to an AFGE Council 220 SSA Employee Morale and Retention Research Report created by CPS:³¹

³¹ https://www.afgec220.org/_files/ugd/ea4ea7_4c05276f4f1947d4a326ba7eb24c41f3.pdf

[Participants of the report] overwhelmingly agree (91%) that they are more efficient and productive while teleworking, with 84% strongly agreeing. The biggest factor is the lack of distractions they have while teleworking compared to office work – only 10% say they have more distractions outside of the office. Likewise, 90% agree they are more focused while teleworking, and 85% say they can complete 75% to 100% of their daily workload working remotely, which is significantly higher compared to the estimate for working in the office.

When asked their preference if they could choose their work location, 65% selected full-time telework, while 28% favored a hybrid schedule and only 5% would rather work full time in the office. While half (51%) agree that it would be challenging for the Agency to implement a one-size-fits all telework policy, 94% say that it is possible for SSA to tailor a telework approach to meet the diverse needs and situations of employees and the public.

In the words of Angela DiGeronimo, AFGE Council 220 New York Regional Vice President, and AFGE Local 2369 President:

On behalf of the bargaining unit and the public SSA services, AFGE advocates for a robust telework program. SSA must recognize that the Agency's business model is antiquated and no longer the best approach to service delivery. Leveraged properly, teleworking will not only address the recruitment and retention crisis that the Agency finds itself in, but it will also be a fiscally responsible option. Telework can be leveraged to increase staffing while keeping brick and mortar expenses low. AFGE does not advocate closing any offices that provide in-person service to the public; however, it is necessary to increase staffing in these existing spaces to provide quality public service.

Telework can theoretically double staffing in an office while keeping rent expenses at current rates. Employees who are in a hybrid telework and in person work schedule may desk share, reducing the need for bigger office space. An office can hire based on the number of employees needed to provide quality public service rather than be limited by the number of employees who can be accommodated in the brick-and-mortar space.

Additionally, telework can be leveraged to hire in competitive job markets. In Teleservice Centers and Workplace Support Units, where employees do not serve the public in person, telework can expand, or remote work jobs created, where the Agency engages in recruitment. The Agency can venture into markets where the salary offered is competitive for the talent and skills needed to perform the duties needed to serve the public.

Telework has proven to be an effective tool for minimizing service interruptions during extreme weather conditions when offices need to close out of health and safety concerns. According to an AFGE Local 3342 case study:

Since SSA employees' return to Field Offices in March 2022, there have been 11 days of severe weather that resulted in full day office closures throughout 17 upstate New York offices represented by AFGE Local 3342. Had these closures occurred in a non-telework environment, SSA and the public served by SSA's Field Offices would have lost upwards of 10,000 hours of productivity. In addition, there is a savings of approximately \$341,000 in weather and safety leave that would have been paid to employees, had telework not been available.

Telework eligible employees may continue to provide service to the public from home when they would otherwise not be able to because an office closes. Office closures also happen due to facility issues, such as power outages or plumbing issues. An Agency that is prepared to have their workforce shift to telework when an emergency arises is better equipped to provide quality service to the public during most situations.

AFGE requests that along with a robust telework program, the Agency update antiquated policies. Allowing employees to process claims using information provided through interface with other Agencies will improve public service and streamline processing. Many times, claims pend processing because claimants need to submit proofs. Information that can be verified without claimants needing to provide proof would decrease wait times for processing claims significantly. The policy has been updated in the past. For example, American citizens no longer need to submit birth certificates to show proof of date of birth. The Agency updated policy to allow proof of age tolerance when SSA records show the same date of birth alleged by the claimant. This simple update in policy years ago significantly reduced processing wait times for retirement claims. There are other policies that can be updated and must be updated. Policy changes and telework are intertwined in that they can be leveraged to reduce the need to have elderly and disabled claimants visit an SSA office to have their claim processed.

Lastly, but certainly not least in importance, teleworking is environmentally responsible by reducing emissions. Experts warn that countries need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions significantly. SSA as a Federal employer can do their part in being environmentally responsible while leveraging telework to continue to provide quality service to the public.

The job market is changing globally. If SSA is to remain competitive, we must recognize that work is no longer somewhere we go but something we do. SSA must also recognize that the public we serve has also changed and evolved. The elderly and disabled of today no longer want to be restricted to obtaining service from the Social Security Administration by visiting an office and waiting for hours. Today's SSA claimant is more technologically savvy and wants more options in how to engage with SSA. Many of those options lend themselves to providing telework for the workforce which will provide work/life balance for employees, thereby leading to loyalty and longevity with the Agency.

Senate Confirmation of New Leadership

The American Federation of Government Employees and the 42,500 employees it represents have three asks of any leader of the Social Security Administration:

1. That the Commissioner will actively work to improve Union-Management cooperation, engage directly with Union leaders where necessary to bring real leadership to the Agency and not abdicate authority and decision-making to the Office of Labor-Management Relations.
2. That the Commissioner will work to secure full funding for the Agency, while working to improve training, employee morale, and recruitment and retention of the Agency's bargaining unit workforce.
3. That the Commissioner, driven by accurate data, will improve and expand the telework program, virtual service delivery, necessary technology tools, and accompanying policy modernization. The Commissioner will publicly position telework as a cost-saving and environmental protection measure that improves recruitment and retention of employees, productivity, service delivery, and efficiency. The Commissioner will create remote work positions within the bargaining unit to increase service delivery to the public and improve employee morale and retention.

Employee Psychological Workplace Safety

Social Security Administration has been undergoing a health and wellbeing crisis. This is due to the Agency's systematic anti-employee practices. Low morale, employee burnout, abuse of authority, harmful levels of stress, micromanagement, and a broken/one-sided Agency harassment protocol are some of the practices that are both hindering and shrinking our workforce and affecting SSA's frontline employees.

SSA employees are leaving at alarming numbers like never before; "Government Executive" reported that SSA staffing levels are at a 25-year low. This is due to the Agency's toxic work environment/culture. Employees are experiencing burnout, are overstressed, overworked and a feeling of being unappreciated. In 2022, the Partnership for Public Service ranked SSA dead last in best places to work among large Federal agencies based on the 2022 U.S Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Federal employee viewpoint survey results. SSA's culture of abusive leadership along with the information gathered from various surveys like these has made SSA unappealing when potential new hires are comparing SSA with other Federal agencies.

Despite SSA's challenging work environments Partnership for Public Service also ranked SSA second overall as the public most trustworthy federal Agency. This is only possible because of the hard work and dedication of SSA's bargaining unit employees doing the public's work.

Frontline employees are the heartbeat of SSA, nevertheless the SSA is making us sick.

In a 2022 Council 220 Health and Safety Survey it was revealed that:

- Over 65% of employees reported taking unscheduled leave to deal with work related stress.
- 78% of employees have noticed a decline in physical or mental health related to work stress.
- Nearly 64% do not believe that their health and safety is a priority for their management team.

A 2023 AFGE SSA General Committee Survey showed:

- 80% of employees feel micromanaged.
- 44% felt personally verbally or mentally abused by their manager or supervisor.
- 60% believe an abuse of supervision exists in their work environment.
- 70% believe bullying is prevalent in their work environment.

According to Jennifer Ramirez-Serrano, AFGE C220 Co-Chair Health and Safety Committee:

In my position as the Co-Chair of the AFGE C220 National Health and Safety Committee I've brought these issues up to the Agency time and time again with no success. I shared survey results and employee statements with the Agency and demonstrated the urgent need for workplace psychological safety reform.

In a recent response to an information request the agency admitted that only 11.5% of all bullying/harassment cases from 11/1/2015 to 9/30/2022 had some degree of corrective/remedial action taken by the agency. This is from a total of about 17,000 allegations of harassment/bullying during this time. In an agency of about 40,000 bargaining unit employees these numbers are alarming and of great concern. 88.5% of these cases either had no action from the agency to either correct or stop the bullying behavior or were simply dismissed. If these numbers are not concerning enough, the Agency's harassment prevention protocol in and of itself is outrageous. The Agency has total control of the handling of the reported incidents from start to finish, even though it is often the agency management officials that are doing the alleged abusive conduct. In other words, the agency receives the complaints, they get to decide what to do with the complaint, whether to investigate it or not, and if they choose to investigate they investigate themselves, and 9 out of 10 times they find no wrongdoing with their actions.

Supporting SSA's employees and compelling SSA to create an effective healthy workplace and anti-bullying/harassment policy and enforcement protocol is vital for the success and longevity of SSA for years to come.

Today, Congress can save the Federal workforce and the American people from this systematic abusive workplace culture that hurts SSA employees and their families.

Today, Congress can ensure SSA fosters a healthy work environment free of bullying and harassment for the sake of all SSA workers and the public we serve by introducing and voting into law at the Federal level the Healthy Workplace Bill <https://healthyworkplacebill.org/>.

Today, Congress can ensure that the Agency, in partnership with AFGE, reforms their own anti-harassment protocol and extends it to include an anti-bullying policy and effective enforcement mechanism.

Today, Congress can ensure SSA employees are given the resources and tools they need to be able to provide superb service to the American people including qualified individuals who need a Social Security card to work, widows, surviving children, the elderly, and the disabled. Without your involvement and intervention, the future of Social Security is at stake. The time is now, before another employee resigns, gets sick due to the harmful stress levels, or we lose another life due to unhealthy work environments at SSA.

Improve veteran recruitment and retention at SSA.

Under the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA) of 1998, as amended, agencies allow veterans to compete for job opportunities that are not offered to other external candidates. Even with VEOA, SSA struggles to recruit veterans because our telework program and pay is not competitive.

While VEOA helps draw veterans into service at SSA, it does not provide for their retention. That is SSA's responsibility.

Based on information we received from the Agency, we now know that from October 2014 to June 30, 2022, SSA hired 8,211 veterans. Of that number, 2,132 resigned and 1,291 were terminated, meaning 42% of veterans hired by SSA in that time are no longer with the Agency.

Years of analysis and review have also found that too many managers lack the soft skills, patience, empathy, and knowledge necessary for veterans to thrive in their SSA careers.

SSA must work diligently with AFGE to improve veteran recruitment and retention as we owe this to veterans who put on their second suit of service to their country.

In Conclusion

AFGE represents SSA employees in crisis. We are significantly understaffed, leading to high levels of stress, burnout, and attrition. We are asked to serve an ever-growing portion of the American population with a shrinking staff.

SSA can make changes to its operations, culture, and staff support to address these challenges. However, the Agency requires a workable budget with enough resources to address the employee crisis. It is in Congress's hands to fully fund the Agency at a level that meets public demand.

AFGE appreciates your time and attention to these vital matters affecting customer service at the Social Security Administration. We believe there are many solutions to fixing Social Security's service delivery concerns. We remain committed to working with Congress, the White House, and the Agency to address these issues head on, and in the process create a more thriving Social Security workforce that remains, as always, steadfast and dedicated to meeting the Agency's mission: to serve the American people by providing the right amount, to the right person, at the right time.

Thank you,

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